

THE SHOT IN THE EYE.

A STORY OF FRONTIER LIFE IN TEXAS.

The following tale of Texas border life, is a faithful portrayal of a large portion of the population of Texas forty years ago. It was published originally in the Democratic Review.

My word for it, reader, I should never have ventured to construct a professed romance out of incidents so wild and strange as those of this nation. It is only with the hope that you will accept in good faith the assurance given in the same spirit, that these things really did occur while I was in the country, and most of them within my personal knowledge—that I venture to relate them at all. Remember, the scene is laid in a frontier county of Texas, and if you have even a remote conception of the history of that Republic and the general character of social elements, you will be prepared for a good deal.

Shelby county, lying in Western Texas, on the border of the "Red Lands," was rather thinly settled in the latter part of '39. That population it had was generally the worst caste of border life. The bad and desperate men who had been driven over our frontier formed a rallying ground and headquarters here—seemingly with a determination to hold the country good against the intrusion of all honest persons, and as a sort of "Alsatia" of the West, for the protection of outlaws and villains of every grade. And indeed to such an extent had this proscription been carried that it had become notoriously as much as a man's conscience or life was worth who settled among them with any worthy purpose in view; for he must fall into their confederacy—leave—die! This was perfectly understood; and the objects of the confederacy may be readily appreciated, when it is known that every now and then a party of men would sally out from this settlement, painted and equipped like Conanches, with the view of carrying off the horses of some of the neighboring countrymen; then, returning with great speed, they would reappear with their plunder, resume their accustomed appearance, and defy pursuit or investigation. Not only did they hand together for their operations in this way, but a single man would carry off a fine horse or commit a murder with the most open audacity, and if he only succeeded in escaping here, was publicly protected. I do not mean to have it understood that the whole population at this time were men of this stamp.

There were some few who were worth to a degree protected them in the observances of a more seemly life—though they were compelled at least to wink at the doings of their raffish and more numerous neighbors; while there were yet another, but not large class of steadily reformed emigrants, who, attracted by the beauty of the country, had come into it, settled themselves down wherever they took a fancy—with characteristic recklessness, neither caring nor asking who were their neighbors, but trusting in their own stout arms and hearts to keep a footing. Of course all such were very soon engaged in desperate feuds with the horse-thieves and plunderers around them; and as they were not yet strong enough to make headway efficiently—were one after another finally ousted or shot. It was to exterminate this honest class that the more lawless and brutal of the others associated themselves and assumed the name of "Regulators." They numbered from eight to twelve—and under the organization of rangers, commanded by a bearded man named Hinch, they professed to undertake the task of purifying the county limits of all bad and suspicious characters; or in other words, of all men who refused to be as vile as they were—or if they were, who chose to act independently of them and their schemes. This precious brotherhood soon became the scourge of all that region. Whenever an individual was unfortunate enough to make himself obnoxious to them, whether by a successful villainy, the proceeds of which he refused to share with them, or by the hateful contrast of his course—he was forthwith surrounded—threatened—had his stock driven off or killed—wounded or shot, and if these annoyances and hints were not sufficient to drive him away, they would publicly execute him to leave the county in a certain number of days, under the penalty of being scourged or shot. The common pretext for this was the accusation of having committed some crime, which they themselves had perpetrated with a view of furnishing a charge to bring against him. Their hate was entirely ruthless and never stopped short of accomplishing its purpose; and in many a bloody fray and cruel outrage had the question of their supremacy been mooted, until at last there were few left to dispute with them, and they tyrannized at will.

Among these few were Jack Long, as he was called, who neither recognized nor denied their power, and indeed never troubled himself about them one way or the other. He kept himself to himself, hunted incessantly, and nobody knew of a "wild turkey breed," as the western term is, a young man, had pushed on ahead of the settlement of two territories, and had at last followed the game towards the south, and finding it abundant in Shelby county, had stopped there, just as he would have stopped at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, had it been necessary to pursue it so far. He had never been in the habit of asking leave of any power where he should settle; and of course scarcely thought of the necessity of doing so; now, but quietly set to work—built himself a nice log-cabin, as far off from every body as he could get. And the first thing that was known of him, he had his pretty young wife and two little ones snugly stowed away in it, and was playing the deer and the bears right and left.

The honest brotherhood had made several attempts feeling Jack's pulse and ascertaining his availability; but good always seemed so impressively pleasant, that they could find no ground for either disturbing or quar-

reling with him. What was more, he was physically rather an ugly-looking "customer," with his six feet four inches of brawn and bone; though the inclination, just discoverable in his figure, to corpulence, together with a broad, full, good-humored face, gave an air of sluggishness to his energies, and an expression of easy simplicity to his temper, which offset neither invitation to gratuitous insult nor provocation to dislike. He was the very impersonification of indolence, loyal honesty, slumbering on its conscious strength; and these men, without exactly knowing why, felt some little disinclination to waking him. He had evidently never been roused to a knowledge of himself, and others felt just as uncertain what the knowledge might bring forth as he did, and were not especially jealous of the honor of having it specially tested upon their own persons. So that Jack Long might have been left for many a day in quiet, even in this formidable neighborhood, to cultivate his passion for marksmanship, at the expense of the dumb, wild things around him, but for an unfortunate display he was accidentally made of.

Happening to make off to the store for a fresh supply. This cabin, together with the blacksmith's shop and one or two other huts, constituted the "county town," and as powder and liquor were only to be obtained there, it was the central resort of the Regulators. Jack found them all collected for a great shooting match, in preparation for which they were getting drunk as fast as possible, to steady their nerves. Hinch, the Regulator captain, had always been the hero of such occasions; for, in addition to being a first-rate shot, it was known that it would be a dangerous exertion of skill for any man to beat him—for he was a furious and vindictive bully, and would not fail to make a personal affair of it with anyone who should mortify his vanity by carrying off a prize from him. In addition, the band of scoundrels he commanded was entirely at his service in any extreme, so that they made fearful odds for a single man to contend with.

Everybody else in the county was aware of this state of things, but Jack Long, and he either didn't know or didn't care. After they had fired several rounds, he went lounging listlessly into the crowd which had gathered around the target, exclaiming in admiration over the last brilliant shot of Hinch which was but triumphantly the best. This bully was, as usual, bleating vehemently, taunting every one around him, and when he saw Jack looking very coolly at the factious shot, with no grain of that deferential admiration in his expression which was usually met by the beauty of the country, had come into it, settled themselves down wherever they took a fancy—with characteristic recklessness, neither caring nor asking who were their neighbors, but trusting in their own stout arms and hearts to keep a footing. Of course all such were very soon engaged in desperate feuds with the horse-thieves and plunderers around them; and as they were not yet strong enough to make headway efficiently—were one after another finally ousted or shot. It was to exterminate this honest class that the more lawless and brutal of the others associated themselves and assumed the name of "Regulators." They numbered from eight to twelve—and under the organization of rangers, commanded by a bearded man named Hinch, they professed to undertake the task of purifying the county limits of all bad and suspicious characters; or in other words, of all men who refused to be as vile as they were—or if they were, who chose to act independently of them and their schemes. This precious brotherhood soon became the scourge of all that region. Whenever an individual was unfortunate enough to make himself obnoxious to them, whether by a successful villainy, the proceeds of which he refused to share with them, or by the hateful contrast of his course—he was forthwith surrounded—threatened—had his stock driven off or killed—wounded or shot, and if these annoyances and hints were not sufficient to drive him away, they would publicly execute him to leave the county in a certain number of days, under the penalty of being scourged or shot. The common pretext for this was the accusation of having committed some crime, which they themselves had perpetrated with a view of furnishing a charge to bring against him. Their hate was entirely ruthless and never stopped short of accomplishing its purpose; and in many a bloody fray and cruel outrage had the question of their supremacy been mooted, until at last there were few left to dispute with them, and they tyrannized at will.

"Here! you Jack Long—Shanks—look at that! Take a good look! Can you beat it?" Jack drew back with a quiet laugh, and said good-humoredly—

"Shaw! I don't brag on such shootin' as that, do you?"

"Brag on it! I'd like to see such a moon-eyed chap as you beat it!"

"I don't know as I would be very proud to beat such bunglin' work as that."

"You don't! don't you?" yelled the fellow, now fairly in a rage at Jack's coolness. "You'll try it, won't you? You must try it! You shall try it. We'll see what sort of a swell you are."

"Oh, well," said Jack, interrupting him as he was proceeding to rave for quantity, "just set up your head, if you want to see me put a ball through every hole you can make!"

Perfectly astounded at this rash bearding of the lion—for it was difficult to tell whether contempt or sim-plicity dictated Jack's manner—the men set up the board, while he walked back to the stand, and carelessly swinging his heavy rifle from his shoulder fired, seemingly as quick as thought.

"It's a trick of mine," said he moving towards the mark, as he lowered his gun; "I caught it from shootin' varnents in the eyes; always takes 'em there. It's a notion I've got—it's my cure."

"They all ran eagerly to the target, and sure enough his ball, which was larger than Hinch's, and passed through the same hole, widening it!"

"He's a humbug! It's all accident! He can't do that again!" shouted the ruffian, turning upon his lips looked blue, as the board was raised. "I'll bet the ears of a buffalo calf against his, he can't do it again."

"If you mean by that, to bet your own ears against mine, I'll take you up!" said Jack, laughing, while the men could not resist joining him. Hinch glared round him with a fierce, chafed look, before which those who knew him best quailed, and with compressed lips silently loaded his gun. A new target was put up, at which, after long and careful aim, he fired. The shot was a fine one. The edge of the ball had just broke the centre—Jack, after looking at it, quietly remarked:

"Plumbing out the centre is my fashion; I'll show you a kink or two, Captain Hinch, about the clear thing in shootin'." Give us another board there, boys!"

Another was set up, and after throwing out his gun on the level, in the same rapid, careless style as before, he fired; and when the eager crowd around the target announced that he had driven the centre clear out, he turned upon his heel, and with a pleasant nod to Hinch, started to walk off. The ruffian shouted harshly after him:

"I thought you were a coward! You've made two good shots by accident, and now you sneak off to brag that you've beat me. Come back, sir! You can't shoot before a musket half as true!"

Jack walked on without noticing this mortal insult and challenge, while Hinch laughed tauntingly, long and loud—jeering him with exulting bitterness, as long as he could make himself heard, "a flash in the pan," "a dunghill cock," who had spread his

white feather," while the men who had been surprised into a profound respect for Long, and were now still more astonished at what they considered his "backing out," joined clamorously in hooting his retreat.

The fools! They made a fatal mistake in supposing he left the insult unresented from any fear for himself. Jack Long had a young and pretty wife at home, and his love for her was stronger than his resentment for his own dignity. His passions were slow, and had never been fully aroused—none of them at least but his love, and that presented her instantly, for him and deserted, with her little ones, in this wild country should he throw away his life with such desperate odds; and seeing the turn the affair was likely to take, he had prudently determined to get away before it had gone too far. But had any of these men seen the back of any such thing, they would have been as much surprised as those who were now so much surprised at what they considered his "backing out," joined clamorously in hooting his retreat.

It was the third day after this meeting. Jack, during all the previous days, had departed himself with the most stolid indifference. Avoiding all intercourse with the settlers, he had continued to hunt with even more assiduity than usual, and was in a great measure ignorant of the unenviable notoriety he was enjoying. He had heard something of the charges with which his character had been assailed, but attributed them all to the jealous enmity he had incurred at the shooting match. He could understand perfectly how one man could hate another who had beat him in shooting, and thought it natural enough; but he could not understand how that hatred might be meanly and desperately vindictive, and therefore gave himself no uneasiness about it. He was only anxious that his wife should not hear and be annoyed by any of these things, and preserved his usual cheerfulness of demeanor.

He had just returned from hunting, and having just his acquaintances, partook of the simple meal her neighborly hand had prepared for him, when stretching himself upon the sofa, he lay on the floor, roused with his two very checked boys, who rolled over his great body, and gambled and screamed in riotous joy around him; but mother wanted some water from the branch, and the frolic must be given over while Jack would go and bring it. So jumping up, he left the little folk peering wildly as they looked after him from the door, and started. The stream was only about a hundred yards from the house, and the path leading to it was through a dense, thick thicket. It was against Jack's religion ever to leave his house without his gun; but the wife whom he loved above all the universe of sentiment and everything else, was in a hurry for the water, and the distance was so short—so he sprang out into the woods in his hands, leaving the rifle behind. The water had been dipped up, and he was returning along the narrow path closely bordered by the brush, when he felt a light tap on each shoulder, and his career strangely impeded. He had just time to perceive that a lasso had been thrown over him, which would confine his arms, when he saw himself suddenly surrounded, and was rushed upon by a number of men. He instantly recognized the voice of Hinch, shout, "down with him! drag him down!" as the men who had hold of the lasso about his body jerked at it violently in the effort to throw him. All his tremendous strength was put forth in one convulsive effort which would have freed him, but the infernal noise had fallen true, and bound his arms. As it was he dragged the six stout men who held it after his frantic bounds, and he went to his own door, before he became prostrated, and then it was by a heavy blow dealt over the head, with the butt of a gun. The last object which met his eye as he sank down, were the horrified faces of his two children and wife looking out upon him.

The blow deprived him of his senses for some time, and when he recovered he found himself half stripped, and lashed to a tree a short distance from his house—Hinch in front of him with a knotted rope in hand, his wife on the ground, waiting and clinging with piteous entreaty around the monster's knees, his children weeping by her, and outside this group a circle of men with guns in their hands. That fearful awakening was a new birth to Jack Long! His eye took everything at a glance. A shudder like that of an ark riding to its cap, sprang along his nerves and seemed to pass out at his feet and through his fingers, leaving him as rigid as marble; and when the blows of the hideous, mocking devil before him, fell upon his white flesh, making it welt in purple ridges, or spout dark black currents, he felt them no more than the dead tint of his door would have done, and the agony of that poor wife shrieking a frantic echo to every harsh slashing sound seemed to have no more effect upon his ear than it had upon the tree above them, which shook its green leaves to the self-same cadence they had held yesterday in the breeze. His wide open eyes were glancing calmly and scrutinizingly into the faces of the men who stood around—those features which he had so often forgotten—for all his furious strength, blaspheming with his fall, that glance dwells on each face with a cold, keen, searching intensity, as if it marked them to be remembered, and like a hawk, he followed him up the mere cogency for this very reason, which would have disarmed a generous man. Besides, Jack had given fresh and weightier matter of offence, in that he had refused to obey, and defied his authority as Regulator. The very being of that authority seemed to require now that a wholesome example should be made of him, for the aving of all other persons hereafter. The infernal wretch, who was as cunning as a fox, and as bold as a lion, in his inmost heart to ruin and disgrace Long from the moment of that triumph, now availed himself remorsefully of all his influence, and knowledge of the society around him to accomplish it. Several horses had disappeared, and robberies of other kind, perpetrated with singular dexterity, followed in quick succession. All these things, which had been through the clamors of his second-rate troops, to have laid directly or indirectly, to Jack's door.

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